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Language Development in Bilingual Children

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LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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Language Development in Bilingual Speakers

As the world becomes increasingly more diverse and multicultural, bilingualism is growing. Bilingualism is the ability to know two different languages at a single time. It is a skill that requires the "acquisition of two languages that use different speech sounds, vocabulary, and grammatical rules" (Weiten, 2010, p. 323). Recent studies have indicated that the majority of the world's population today is now bilingual. It is estimated that between half and two-thirds of the world's population is bilingual (Macrory, 2006, p. 160). The fact that a large percentage of the world's population is bilingual is because there may be no realistic way to be monolingual. For example, some "children may interact regularly with monolingual individuals…and others of whom speak another language" (Houwer, 1999, p.1). This means that a child may speak a language at home with their parents and another at school and with friends. Many families are moving to different countries, where this situation is more common and acceptable.

Early Communication Milestones

When children start to communicate, there are important milestones that they need to reach. Monolingual children begin saying first words around their first birthday (Rossetti, 2001). However, communication starts much earlier than that, with

babbling, jargon, and other vocalizations (Rossetti, 2001). The mean length of utterance increases as the child gets older. They start to understand more vocabulary and are able to follow simple commands around 18 months (Rossetti, 2001). Studies have shown that “typically developing children follow a specific path of language development and there is an intricate relationship between vocabulary development and grammar acquisition” (Wong Kwok Shing, 2006, p. 282). After a child has mastered a large amount of vocabulary, grammar skills are then attained (Wong Kwok Shing, 2006, p. 282).

There are a variety of expressive and receptive language skills that children need to learn. Both start to emerge soon after the child is born. Rossetti (2001) stated that by six months a child should be able to vocalize sounds and produce a variety of facial expressions. Rossetti (2001) noted that by 12 months a child will babble with a variety of consonant-like sounds, take turns vocalizing with others, will have social interaction as well as joint attention. A typically developing child will produce a variety of sounds that may sound like words of short sentences, and produce a few meaningful words by 18 months (Rossetti, 2001). Ten to 15 words should be used meaningfully by 24 months (Rossetti, 2001). Rossetti (2001) stated that around that same time speech should be present and at least 50% of that speech should be intelligible to caregiver.

By 36 months a child should produce sentences of three to five words, ask simple questions, talk about past and future events, and have vocabulary of 100 to 200 words (Rossetti, 2001). These are all expected expressive communication skills a monolingual child should go through according to Rossetti (Rossetti, 2001).

According to Rossetti (2001) there are also certain comprehension skills a typically developing child needs to acquire. During the first three months of life children should quiet to a familiar voice, smile at their mother's face, and watch the speaker's mouth (Rossetti, 2001). By six months of age infants should recognize and respond to their name, appear to recognize words like "up" and "bye-bye", and respond to pleasant speech by smiling (Rossetti, 2001). A typically developing child in the age range of six to nine months should move toward or search for family member when named, begin to understand the word "no", show stranger anxiety, and relate sounds to object (Rossetti, 2001). After a child reaches the age of one, they should understand words such as "hot" and "so big", understand some action words, shake head for yes or no, respond to verbal request, and follow simple commands (Rossetti, 2001). These are all comprehension skills a typically developing monolingual speaker should acquire (Rossetti, 2001).

Rossetti, stated the following main points, that as children grow, language tasks become more complex. Their speech becomes more intelligible, they are able to combine more words together to create longer sentences, and are able to understand more words. Once children enter school they are better able to follow multiple-step commands. These receptive and expressive language skills an individual masters are important in order to become a successful student.

In the past, parents of bilingual children were suggested to only use one language with their child (Houwer, 1999, p.1). Past research that Houwer reported on claimed that hearing two different languages while learning to speak will confuse the child and will cause major language acquisition problems later (Houwer, 1999, p.1). The research also suggested that the dominant language of the child's environment will "stand a better chance" at being mastered without interference from the other language (Houwer, 1999, p.1). Both of these points are no longer supported as "there is no scientific evidence to date that hearing two or more languages leads to delays or disorders in language acquisition" (Houwer, 1999, p.1). In addition, Bjelland (2009) stated:

> Some individuals believe that exposing a child to two languages concurrently in infancy or childhood will result

> in a slowed period of language development. However, according to research, this belief represents an oversimplification of the dual language acquisition process that occurs for sequential bilinguals (p.1).

Many young children grow up learning or hearing two different languages and no current data has shown language learning problems (Bjelland, 2009, p.1).

Strengths of Bilingualism

There are many benefits to learning multiple languages. Children who are bilingual have shown the ability to code switch. Code switching refers to the ability to use different words in different situations. This means that the child may use a word and incorporate it in the wrong language (Macrory, 2006). For example, if a French-English speaker is speaking in English and is suddenly unsure how to verbalize a particular word the child may say it in French. The ability to do this is not negative, instead children know that they are using two different languages and they are able to separate the vocabulary (Macrory, 2006). It has been said that "code switching does not inhibit semantic development…semantic knowledge in both of a bilingual's languages boosts productivity across the lexical and syntactic systems" (Bedore, Pena, Garcia, & Cortez, 2005). As the English language becomes more significant all around the world, parents want to "ensure their children's competitive edge

over other individuals in a competition-driven society embracing the philosophy of 'survival of the fittest', children need to learn English at an early age because English is the international language of communication" (Wong Kwok Shing, 2006, p. 280). Parents who teach their children English may put them at a competitive advantage later in life.

There are performance differences between bilingual and monolingual preschoolers. According to Mattock, Polka, Rvachew, and Krehm (2010), there are "cognitive advantages in bilinguals compared to monolingual children – most notably in metalinguistic awareness" (p.231). This means that bilingual children are better able to understand "abstract linguistic representations…for example, bilingual children realize that the relationship between an object and its label is purely arbitrary, and are more willing to accept a novel or unconventional name for an object than their monolingual peers" (Mattock, Polka, Rvachew, & Krehm, 2010, p. 231). This small language advantage is just another benefit to learning two languages simultaneously and becoming bilingual at a young age.

Additionally, some studies show that bilingual speakers score higher on IQ tests than monolingual speakers. Weiten (2010) stated, "When middle-class bilingual subjects who are

fluent in both languages are studied, they tend to score somewhat higher than monolingual subjects on measures of cognitive flexibility, analytical reasoning, selective attention, and metalinguistic awareness" (p. 324). Studies have only been conducted on children from middle class backgrounds, which is interesting because scores may not be reliable for all populations (Weiten, 2010, p. 324). Weiten (2010) also noted that some bilingual children do more poorly on tests that involve language processing speed, when compared to monolingual peers. Usually these tasks can be improved and bilingual speakers can catch up to their peers (Weiten, 2010, p. 324).

To further support these points, Kenji Hakuta (1986) states:

> Studies contradict the argument that bilingualism in itself might cause cognitive confusion in the child, and support the idea that bilingualism can lead to higher levels of metalinguistic awareness and cognitive ability. In general, they point to the benefits to children of all language backgrounds of learning and maintaining two languages (p. 2).

Hakuta, also reports that when a variety of mental capacities are measured between both monolingual and bilingual children, the bilingual children perform better (Hakuta, 1986, p.6).

Interestingly, “the ability in which bilingual children seem to be superior, of particular interest to the educator is a skill that has been called metalinguistic ability… this refers to the ability to think flexibly and abstractly about language” (Hakuta, 1986, p.6).

One can see that research has proven that bilingual children have an advantage in certain language skills when compared to monolingual children. It has also been noted that bilingual children have no disadvantages when learning to speak two languages.

Bilingual Development Milestones

The American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA) states “bilingual children develop language skills just as other children do” (Learning Two Languages, 2001, p.2). All over the world children are growing up speaking more than one language and are not developing any speech or language problems (Learning Two Languages, 2001). The same sequence is used whether learning to speak one language or two. Bilingual children say their first words around the age of one, which is the same for monolingual speakers, and by the age of two they can combine two words to create a small phrase (Learning Two Languages, 2001). Important milestones will be acquired in much the same way as monolingual speakers, “research evidence that bilingual children go through

much the same stages of language development as their peers learning one of the two languages" (Macrory, 2006, p. 164). A child as young as five months is aware of hearing two different languages, even if the sounds are very similar (Macrory, 2006, p. 164). According to Barry "infants have a natural capacity to learn languages and the number of languages is not a factor in a delay of any language…an infant brain has the ability to differentiate between each language and interpret cues based on context in order to understand which language is appropriate in different situations" (Barry, 2011, p. 2). Based on this information, one can say that the infant brain has the power to pick up multiple languages. It is clear to see that multiple studies have supported the idea that language development is acquired in much the same way regardless if the child is bilingual or monolingual.

Young bilingual speakers may use a combination of both languages when speaking. ASHA stated that this is normal "from time to time, children may mix grammar rules, or they might use words from both languages in the same sentences. This is a normal part of bilingual language development" (Learning Two Languages, 2001, p.2). Even though vocabulary from both languages may be used in a single sentence, children are able to separate the two different languages from one another (Houwer,

1999, p.2). Bilingual children may feel more comfortable using one language over the other if they know more vocabulary in one language; therefore, they may substitute an unfamiliar word with the word in the language in which they have most confidence (Houwer, 1999, p.2). It has also been shown that bilingual speakers only use a combination of the two languages in a single sentence around others who are bilingual (Houwer, 1999, p.2). This supports the idea that children are aware of their environment and when to use which language.

Sometimes a bilingual child is more dominant is one language (Wong Kwok Shing, 2006, p. 282). This may be because they are around one language more than the other, or one language may be easier to learn than the other. When this is the case children will know more vocabulary in the dominant language, therefore making them more comfortable in that language (Houwer, 1999, p.2). As the child spends more time around the less dominant language, vocabulary will increase and grammatical rules will be learned (Wong Kwok Shing, 2006, p. 283). It is clear to see that if children speak their dominant language at home and are exposed to a second language outside the home that they would become more fluent in the language they speak at home (Houwer, 1999, p.2). This is due to the fact that the young child will have more opportunities to use the home

language during the day, especially if they don't attend preschool or partake in any activities outside the home (Houwer, 1999, p.2). However, this can quickly change once the child enters school. If the child is able to use one language at home, with family, and the second language outside the home, at school and with friends, both languages will be acquired evenly (Houwer, 1999, p.2).

Some children who are exposed to two different languages may have a "silent period" (Learning Two Languages, 2001). This is described as, "when a second language is introduced, some children may not talk much for a while…this can sometimes last several months…this is normal and will go away" (Learning Two Languages, 2001, p.2). When parents bring their child to their doctor because they are concerned that the child has suddenly stopped talking, the doctor may recommend using only one language. However, this may not be the appropriate thing to do. The child will feel lost and abandoned, especially if they were more connected to the language that is now not being used (Houwer, 1999, p.1). In fact, "there is no scientific evidence that giving up one language automatically has a beneficial effect on the other…the abrupt end of the use of the home language by a child's parents may lead to great emotional and psychological difficulties both for the parents and for the

child" (Houwer, 1999, p.1). Many investigators support the idea that a child may feel more comfortable using their more dominant language; however, with time, practice, and continual exposure to both languages the child will grow out of their "silent period".

As stated above, the "silent period" is normal, and suddenly using just one language may negatively affect the child. However, it is key to understand that if bilingual children are having problems in both languages professional help may be needed (Learning Two Languages, 2001). If the child is not meeting development language milestones in both languages, it may indicate that a language delay or disorder is present. If this is the case, the child would need to be referred to a speech-language pathologist for further evaluation.

Sequential vs. Simultaneous Bilingualism

There are two different types of bilingualism: sequential and simultaneous. The main different between the two is the age at which the individual learns or is introduced to the second language.

Bjelland described sequential bilingualism as, "when the child has exposure to the first language (L1) at birth and then begins to have exposure to the second language (L2) later in

childhood or adulthood" (Bjelland, 2009, p.1). Barry stated that "after the age of three, children are generally considered sequential bilinguals" (Barry, 2011, p.2). Multiple factors can affect how a sequential bilingual child's language. For example, "in situations where the young child whose L1 is a minority language undervalued in the dominant, mainstream culture, the child may be at risk of regression, diminished proficiency, or incomplete acquisition in L1" (Bjelland, 2009, p.1). This is known as 'subtractive bilingualism', in which the child loses word acquisition in their first language as the second language is introduced and developed (Bjelland, 2009, p.2). In this particular situation it is the role of the parents to support and encourage their child to maintain language acquisition in their home language (Bjelland, 2009). This can be accomplished by speaking to the child in their native language whenever they are at home.

The second type of bilingualism, simultaneous, is defined as when "infants who are exposed to more than one language, two separate linguistic systems form that are connected and developed during the first year of life" (Barry, 2011, p.2). According to MacLeod et al. (2010), "despite the differences in age of acquisition, bilinguals who use both languages on a regular basis at work and at home were very proficient in both

languages" (MacLeod, 2010, p.400). This illustrates that if the child can utilize both languages evenly as they mature, they may still be able to contrast between the two and continue to be fluent in both languages. On the other hand, if the child does not keep balance between the two languages, and starts to use one more than the other, the less frequently used language will become weaker (MacLeod, 2010).

Although, some believe that learning a second language earlier is easier for individuals, no current research has proven that one is not capable of acquiring a second language. Even though there are two types of bilingualism, depending on when a child is introduced to the second language, the main factor will be whether the child maintains balance between the two, or uses one of the languages more frequently.

Differentiating Language Differences from Language-Learning Disabilities

When a culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) child is referred to the SLP, the first question they usually need to ask is whether the student has a language difference or a language-learning disability (LLD) (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2008). One needs to determine if, "the problems can be traced to cultural differences or the student's lack of familiarity with English, or if there is an underlying language-learning disability that

requires special education intervention" (Roseberry-McKibblin, 2008, p.439). Tabors (2008) stated that some culturally and linguistically diverse students do not have the environmental and linguistic exposure and experience that are assumed by schools. They may come from nonliterate backgrounds, for example, or from backgrounds where the language is oral only and has not been put in written form (Tabors, 2008). Roseberry-McKibbin, stated, "if a student has normal abilities in the primary language and is having difficulty with English, this student does not need special education remediation services such as speech-language therapy. Rather, the student needs other services, such as bilingual education to facilitate English-language learning" (p.441). Roseberry-McKibbin created the 'diagnostic pie', which describes four different diagnostic labels a child can obtain. Normal language-learning ability is the first diagnostic category; in child the child has an adequate background. The child may need one or more of the following: bilingual education, Sheltered English, and instruction in English as a second language (Roseberry-McKibbin). The second category is described as normal language-learning ability, where the child has limitations of linguistic exposure and environmental experience. The child may need bilingual education, Sheltered English, English as a second language, and additional enrichment experience (e.g., tutoring,

etc.) (Roseberry-McKibbin). The language-learning disability is the third category, where the child has an adequate background, and may need: bilingual special education, and English special education with as much primary language input and teaching as possible (Roseberry-McKibbin). Finally, the last diagnostic category is language-learning disability, where there are limitations of linguistic exposure and environmental experience. The child may need: bilingual special education, English special education with primary language support, and additional enrichment experiences (Roseberry-McKibbin). Figuring out which diagnostic category the child belongs to will help the SLP to refer the child for appropriate services.

How to Test

If a bilingual child's language skills need to be tested, it must be done very carefully. The SLP will need to determine if the child has a language difference or a language delay. The only reason a bilingual child would need to be provided with speech and language services is if the child has delays in both languages (Houwer, 1999). Tabors stated that legally, it must be proven that the student in question has a language learning disability that underlies both languages. In order to test for this, the assessments used must be given in a least biased way (Saenz, 2003). This means that "alternative assessment

approaches, including renorming a test for the specific population being tested, using dynamic assessment techniques to assess a child's modifiability, using other nonstandardized measure, and modifying standardized tests" (Saenz, 2003, p.184). It is important to know "that the administration of language tests in English using current norms is inappropriate for students whose dominant language is not English" (Saenz, 2003, p.184). If the child is not dominant in the language in which they are being tested, it is evident that they will not do well; therefore the scores will not be an accurate representation of their true language abilities. The person administering the assessments must know what kind of accommodations, if any, may be given to the child. For example, a child may be allowed additional instructions, additional trial items, training of concepts being tested, and a higher ceiling (Saenz, 2003, p. 188). It is an important responsibility for the SLP to test a bilingual child's language skills, particularly in making sure it is given in the least biased manner possible.

Parent's Role

There are multiple ways a parent can enhance the learning of two languages. Providing opportunities and reinforcement to children will help them to continue using both languages, "speaking two languages is like any other skill. To do it well,

children need lots of practice, which parents can help provide" (Learning Two Languages, 2001 p. 2). Parents also have to be aware of speaking in the same language to all members of the family, "for instance, do not use one language with the elder and another language the younger. Language is tied to emotions, and if you address your children in different languages, they may feel excluded" (Houwer, 1999 p. 2). Presenting the child with many opportunities throughout the day to use both languages and using the same language with all members of the family are just two ways a parent can increase their child's ability of being bilingual.

Parents can also purchase resources to help their child become bilingual. There are books that parents can buy and read in the second language that they are trying to teach their child. CDs and DVDs can be bought and some of these programs "often teach children about numbers, letters, colors, and basic vocabulary" (Learning Two Languages, 2001 p.2). Parents can also enroll their child in play activities around their community if the less dominant language of the child is the one that is spoken outside the home. With simple purchases, and renting out books from the library, the child can learn to become bilingual with more ease and help from their parents.

Acquiring the skill of becoming bilingual is something that parents can help their child achieve to lead them to become more successful in this competitive world. More and more businesses are looking to hire bilinguals, especially in the United States, as the Spanish language is becoming more evident (Houwer, 1999, p.1). A variety of research shows that exposing infants to two different languages at birth will not cause them to acquire language differently than their monolingual peers (Houwer, 1999, p.2). The “silent period” or slight delay in the child’s less dominant language is normal and bilingual children have shown to do as well as monolingual children in school (Learning Two Languages). Overall, bilingual children acquire language in quite the same way as a monolingual child would, and they may have an advantage later in life when traveling the world or applying for jobs.

The use of evidence based practice (EBP) is important in speech-language pathology in order to provide the most accurate treatment. In order to find precise information related to how bilingual children development language skills, evidence is needed to prove that milestones are reached the same way as monolingual children. Particular EBP concerning this topic tells SLPs that learning two languages simultaneously will not delay a

child, and parents should not be alarmed if their child has a "silent period".

Literature included in this research paper suggests that a clinician should only be concerned if their bilingual client has a delay or disorder in both of the languages. These findings imply that a bilingual child may have a delay in one language, especially if it is not their dominant one. This is normal and soon the child will catch up to their peers, and parents should just encourage and reinforce their child for trying to speak in their less dominant language, even if mistakes are made.

A question that was not answered in this literature review was if it was more likely for male or female children to have a "silent period". Another interesting question to look further into is what part of the United States are most bilingual children being raised and why. Both of these questions were not addressed in the research articles, however, it would be interesting to find out these answers. Future research is very important to conduct regarding bilingual children. More and more parents are raising their children to speak two different languages; therefore, it is crucial to find more information. In the future we may find that some delays are seen in bilingual children that are not evident in monolingual children. For this

reason, we need to keep researching and developing studies that observe bilingual children.

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